

Facilitating Online Communities

An Example of WikiEducator's
WikiPublishing Model



Facilitating online communities



Work in progress, expect frequent changes. **Help and feedback is welcome.** See [discussion page].



Chat Room - A photo by iBoy Daniel

Course blog

Facilitating Online Communities blog

[http:// facilitatingonlinecommunities.blogspot.com/ rss.xml](http://facilitatingonlinecommunities.blogspot.com/rss.xml)|Date|short|max=3

Facilitation is a rare and valuable skill to have. It is a service that is often used in conferences, debates, panels and tutorials, or simply where groups of people are meeting and need someone to help negotiate meaning and understanding, and to keep everyone engaged and on task.

* Good facilitation depends on good communication skills.

* Good online facilitation depends on good online communication skills.

* Facilitating online communities... what does that involve?

This course has been developed by staff in the Educational Development Centre of Otago Polytechnic and is designed to help both formal and informal learners access and interpret models, research and professional dialog in the facilitation of online communities. After completing this course people should be confident in facilitating online and/ or be able to critique and offer advice to other people in the facilitation of online communities.

Participation in this course is open. You will need to be able to regularly access the Internet and have independence in completing tasks. To join simply introduce yourself to

the discussion page and include an email address that can be use to add you to an email forum. You will join a group who will be attending online events and discussions, and writing weekly entries to blogs according to the schedule and assignments below. The next facilitated course starts 28 July 2008.

In formal learning terms this is a level 7 course registered on the New Zealand Qualifications Authority and is included in the ####. Formal learning participants engage in this course for a period of 10 weeks with an indicative time commitment of at least 6 hours per week. Formal learners will receive tuition, assessment services and formal recognition at the completion of the course. Some people may prefer to engage in this course informally and to set their own pace through the work using the schedule as a guide. Informal engagement is welcome and arrangements can be made for formal assessment and certification at any time with the course facilitator.

Learning objectives

- Define an online community
- Define online learning
- Develop facilitation skills
- Apply facilitation skills within an online learning community
- Evaluate the facilitation of an online learning community

Assignments

Assignment 1: Weekly reading and blogging

Follow the course schedule, read the assigned material, participate in any events, and post notes to your blog with responses to weekly questions. You should also post to your blog progress reports on your assignments. Your blogging should demonstrate your understanding of the assigned reading material and events, and should include original thoughts, synthesis and references. Don't just summarize readings or events. Making connections between the weekly topics, or previous blogging (of your own or of other participants) is strongly encouraged.

- Help in getting started with blogs

To keep up with the contributions of other participants, you may wish to set up an (RSS) news reader and subscribe to their blogs. This will save you a lot of time by not having to go to each blog. News readers are a very efficient and simple way to establish a connection with others in the course, and to stay up to date with what they are doing.

- Help in getting started with an RSS news reader

Assignment 2: Facilitate an online event

Plan for and facilitate an online event for the week 9 conference event in this course. Your task is to identify a topic of interest expressed by participants in previous weeks. You are to arrange for a guest speaker, panel or other online activity that you will facilitate for the conference. You will need to negotiate with the guest speaker/ s, arrange times and locations. You will coordinate your session collaboratively with others in this course, and you will field inquiries and handle technical issues during your session. The course facilitator will coordinate the week 9 conference over all.

The following plan might help you to prepare:

After you have established an event which you will facilitate, create a plan of how you will facilitate the session. Include things like:

- Title for the session
- The aim of the session
- Promotions for the session (contact list, flier, bios, summary)
- Key links for the event, dates and times, background information, and discussion starters
- A description of technical support services available
- A contingency plan for technical problems, poor or over attendance, and other disruptions
- An indication of whether recording will be done and where it will be made available after the event

Assignment 3: Facilitation evaluation

Report on your own or another's facilitation of an event in the week 9 online conference. Report on the following:

- Was the event organised and promoted well?
- Was the event managed and conducted well? - noting the way the facilitator handled any disruptions.
- Did the facilitator make efforts to ensure that all participants knew where they were supposed to be and when, and arrange technical support for people?
- Did the facilitator set the stage, make introductions, explain the aims, and manage to remain neutral and facilitatory?
- Did the facilitator round up, draw closure and indicate where recordings and other follow up would be made available?
- Was the follow up done in a timely and professional manor?
- General comments and additions

Schedule

Below is a schedule for the course. Week 1 begins 27 July 2008. Try to keep up with this schedule so that we can more or less be at a similar point and benefit from one another's work. At the conclusion of each week, your course facilitator will sum up.

Wk 1: Orientation 28 July - 3 August

A week spent orientating yourself into the course, the commitment required, the assignments and what else is involved

To do

1. Set up a blog for your weekly work in this course. If you already have a blog, you are welcome to use that so long as you can clearly indicate what posts are for this course. If you are new to blogging, refer to this resource for getting started. If you are based in the Otago region, Otago Polytechnic offers learning support in setting up a blog through its Learning Centre (for enrolled students) and Community Learning Centres (for the wider community).
2. Introduce yourself to the course in the discussion page. When you have your blog set up, add your blog's web address to your introduction in the discussion page.
3. Attend the web conference meeting UTC 10pm 28 July (10am 29 July NZST) to discuss the orientation to the course. Please try to introduce yourself to the course discussion page before this meeting begins. This meeting will be recorded and made available here directly after if you cannot attend. You can test your computer and network settings prior to the meeting by using the Elluminate support page.
4. Post to your blog what you hope to get out of this course. Include any concerns or questions you may have.

Extra resources

- resources for getting started with blogging



Screengrab of the Facilitating online communities course outline

Wk 2: What is an online community? 4 - 10 August

Most people use the phrase "online community" very loosely. You will hear educationalists use it to refer to communities of practice, classes, groups, professional bodies, teams, networks, you name it - they have all been referred to as communities at some stage, and when they predominantly operate through the Internet they are called online communities. But what is an online community really - especially if we want to relate the words to their true and common meaning? Is it a group of people who communicate online, and through that connection they share a sense of belonging and responsibility for one another? Is an online community like this necessary for work teams, classes, professional bodies and all those other things that have been called communities? In this course we will be looking for online communities in very different places. It is important that we try and develop an understanding of what exactly we are looking for. What is an online community?



Meeting with Grad Students in Second Life - a photo by Pathfinder Linden. Pathfinder Linden spoke at a weekly meeting held by grad students who are using Second Life as part of their academic research. My discussion focused on the importance of research ethics in virtual worlds. Fantastic group of folks, and they have an excellent wiki with more information about their work: http://www.simteach.com/wiki/index.php?title=Second_Life_Grad_Student_Colony

To do

1. Look at these links:

- ResearchSpace at The University of Auckland: Interaction between existing social networks and information and communication technology (ICT) tools: As a conclusion, it is suggested any ICT intervention in a developing country requires at least three elements to be effective: a tolerable physical infrastructure, a strong degree of social texture and an activator of information.
- Stephen Downes' Groups and Networks: Video and article

2. Write a post to your blog that describes what you think an online community is, and what indicating features you might look for in identifying an online community. 3. Comment on the blog post of at least one other person from this course

Extra resources

- 1% Rule - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia
- Clay Shirky's A group is its own worst enemy
- Susan Herring's Gender and power in online communication

Wk 3: Facilitating, moderating, or teaching 11 - 17 August

Many people either don't understand the differences, or too easily confuse the different roles of a facilitator, moderator and teacher. Some teachers believe that teaching is an act of facilitation. Some facilitators see their main role as moderating discussion and keeping order. This week we will consider the differences in these three roles and attempt to describe situations where they might be mutually exclusive from one another.

To do

Try to determine the role and behavior of these three roles:



- Facilitator
- Moderator
- Teacher

And attempt to describe their roles in your own words. Discuss one or all of the following questions:

1. When does the act of teaching compromise the role of a facilitator of an online community?
2. When does the act of moderating online discussion compromise the role of a facilitator of an online community?
3. When does the act of facilitation compromise the role of a teacher or moderator in an online community?
4. When are these three roles appropriate in an online community?

Extra resources

- Web Worker Daily: Building Online Community Brick by Virtual Brick - Since I first got online in 1987, I've been using the Internet (or at that time, Bulletin Board Systems) for not only communications but for community building - for my own projects and for clients.
- Wikibooks: Managing Groups and Teams/ How Do You Build High- performing Virtual Teams?
- GROU.PS is a platform for social groups to get together. Use it for any purpose. Choose your template and pick all the modules that you want (wiki, blogs, photos, links etc). And get your group web site without waiting. No branding, it's free!
- Effective Online Facilitation - Australian Flexible Learning Framework guide
- The Art of Building Virtual Communities (Techlearning blog) - Anyone who has ever thrown a party or held a meeting has had this unvoiced fear: what if after all the work

of preparation, nobody shows up? Or worse, people show up, take a quick look around, decide it isn't worth their time and leave!

Wk 4: Looking for online community: Discussion forums 18 - 24 August

To do

In Internet culture, reflects a theory that more people will lurk in a virtual community than will participate. This term is often used as a euphemism for Participation inequality.

Extra resources

- Managing Online Forums - A book, website and blog by Patrick O'Keefe
- How To Behave On An Internet Forum - Video on how to behave in forums

Wk 5: Looking for online community: Blog networks 25 - 31 August

Extra resources

- Blogging - Not 'IF' but When and Where. UPEI presentation | Dave's Educational Blog - Blogging, like 'academic writing' is a vague label that really doesn't do justice to the complexities of the subject it is meant to cover. Blogging is appropriate any time that people need to be kept 'up to date' with a topic, a person, images,
- Radio New Zealand audio recording: Focus on Politics for 16 May 2008 - Life's a blog. Kate Williamson looks at how the Internet is being used to campaign in election year. File Size:6MB

Wk 6: Looking for online community: Wiki collaborators 1 - 7 September

Course facilitators begin coordinating an online conference for week 9. Participants begin planning their events within the conference. An event wiki and blog is set up and participants enter the plans of the sessions they are facilitating for the conference in Week 9. Begin promotions.

Extra resources

- Rough Type: Nicholas Carr's Blog: Nature's Flawed Study of Wikipedia's Quality - Kapor's remarks inspired me to take a look at that much- cited Nature article. I found that it was something less than I had expected.
- Abject Learning: Is murder, madness and mayhem the future of higher education? - I decided to include wikipedia as a central part of a course I was teaching in the belief that it was only by actively contributing to the encyclopedia that they would learn about its weaknesses, and also its strengths.
- What to Do With Wikipedia By William Badke. *Often banned by professors, panned by traditional reference book publishers, and embraced by just about everyone else, Wikipedia marches on like a great beast, growing larger and more commanding every day. With no paid editors and written by almost anyone, it shouldn't have succeeded, but it has. In fact, it's now emerged as the No. 1 go- to information source in the*

world. It's used not only by the great unwashed but also by many educated people as well. ONLINE reported on the Pew Internet & American Life Project's findings that 36% of the American population regularly consult Wikipedia (July/ August 2007, p. 6).

Wk 7: Looking for online community: Virtual Worlds 8 - 14 September

Wk 8: Looking for online community: Social networking platforms 15 - 21 September

- Apophenia: The Economist Debate on Social "Networking" - Given that MySpace and Facebook are ubiquitous, can social networking be defined as the "collective power of community to help inform perspectives that would not be unilaterally formed" or is it simply a distraction for students?
- QUT News Schools' Web 2.0 ban contributes to social exclusion - Queensland University of Technology media and communication PhD candidate Tanya Notley, from the Creative Industries Faculty, said social networking sites such as MySpace, Bebo and Facebook were blocked on all Queensland State school computers, denying many students without home internet access use of these sites to learn and participate in an increasingly networked society.

Wk 9: Facilitate an event for an online community 22 - 28 September

Participants facilitate their sessions in the conference.

Wk 10: Evaluate the facilitation of an event held for an online community 29 September - 5 October

Related courses

- Tertiary learning and teaching
- Designing for flexible learning practice
- Constructing Courses To Enhance Learning Design Theory

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